

# THE RISE OF THE HOUSE OF OMRI

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The schism that rent the United Monarchy of David and Solomon divided the tribes of Israel into two realms: the Southern Kingdom of Judah and the Northern Kingdom of Israel. In Judah, the heirs of the House of David held the throne through 430 years and 19 reigns, until it was brought to an end not by the will of any Judean but by dictate of a foreign conqueror. No dynasty in Israel attained to anything like this stability and endurance. In the 210 years that the kingdom stood it also had 19 reigns, but of 9 different dynasties. Ten kings inherited the throne, and seven seized it in bloody coups, most of those military men in the royal service. Two were elected in a fashion: Jeroboam I and Omri.

Jeroboam I, whom the Northern tribes chose as their first ruler, was succeeded by his son Nadab. In his second regnal year, while he was besieging the border fortress of Gibbethon that was then held by Philistines, Nadab was struck down by Baasha ben-Abijah of the tribe of Issachar (I Kg. 15:37). It is likely, though not explicitly noted, that Baasha was a military officer of high rank. He took the throne for himself, secured it by slaying every scion of the House of Jeroboam, held it for a quarter of a century, and bequeathed it to his son Elah. With fearful symmetry, Elah ben-Baasha was in his second regnal year and Israel was besieging the Philistines at Gibbethon when the King was struck down by one of his own officers. But while Nadab was in the field with his men when he met his end, Elah was carousing in Tirzah, the town then the site of the royal residence.

*And his servant Zimri, captain of half his chariots, conspired against him. Now he [Elah] was in Tirzah, drinking himself drunk in the house of Arza, who was Over the Household in Tirzah. And Zimri came and struck him down and put him to death and reigned in his stead . . .*

*And it came to pass, when he began reigning, [as soon] as he sat on his throne, he struck down all the House of Baasha. He did not*

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*leave to him a single male of his redeemers [near kinsmen] or of his friends (16:9-11).*

Battle-chariots and the steeds that drew them were the most formidable and costly war matériel of the age, and the men entrusted with them were an elite cadre. Zimri, as commander of half this chariot-corps, would stand well up in the regime, with the confidence of his master and authority over his subordinates. But Arza outranked him, for Over the Household was the civil title for the royal steward, the chief minister of the regime. He seems also to have been a boon companion of King Elah, who was tipping in his house. It is not known whether he was a co-conspirator with Zimri, or one of the "friends" who were Elah's fellow victims. Nor is it known whether Elah was an habitual drunkard, the killer taking advantage of a chronic debility, or whether he had been enticed into a state of vulnerable inebriation. The cited Book of the Chronicles of the Kings of Israel has vanished, so no more can be said of Zimri's conspiracy than can be gleaned from the Narrator's terse extract.

Baasha had won and kept enough support to have a long reign, die a natural death, and be succeeded by his son. Zimri would need comparable support to succeed in his own enterprise, and he did have at least enough men behind him, perhaps drawn from his half of the chariot-corps, to do away with Elah and everyone who might be his heir or avenger. The Captain of Half the Chariots made his cast while many of his colleagues were at the siege of Gibbethon.

If Zimri chose this moment to act because many of the other warriors were off the scene, then he must have been aware that they were not partial to him, and that some among them might oppose him, defend Elah, or even produce a challenger to his own ambition. But what hope could he entertain for a coup by a military man who was not backed by the military? Perhaps he supposed that once the deed was done, the castle at Tirzah was in his possession, and he had proclaimed himself king, then the opportunistic would rally to him and the malcontents would be cowed.

The route from Tirzah to Gibbethon is little more than 40 miles, so a rider on a good horse could bring the news within hours:

*Zimri reigned seven days in Tirzah. And the people were encamped against Gibbethon of the Philistines. And the people that*

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*were encamped heard it said, 'Zimri has conspired, and has also struck down the King.' And all Israel made Omri, the Captain of the Host, king over Israel that day in the camp (16:16).*

Captain of the Host was the highest military rank, and the man who held it was the most powerful subject in the kingdom. It would seem that Elah had delegated the command at Gibbethon to Omri, who had under his orders the regular soldiers and the militia called up for the campaign against the Philistines – men who together composed the "all Israel" encamped there. The professional military and the civilian reserves acted as one in instant and vehement rejection of Zimri. This would not have been solely because Zimri had murdered the reigning monarch and all his kin and kith. Baasha before him and others after him did the same, and the people accepted them, or at least put up with them.

The men at Gibbethon that day would have none of Zimri, whether from strong dislike and distrust of him, or some special regard for Omri, or both. Was the elevation of the Captain of the Host a spontaneous act of confidence, or did he overtly or covertly seek it? Did Zimri underestimate Omri, or was he aware that the Captain of the Host was a threat to him? Did he neglect to take the precaution of doing away with Omri, or was that an element in a plan that went awry?

The beleaguered Philistines in Gibbethon could now watch "all Israel" suddenly break camp and depart. Their numbers may have burgeoned on the march to Tirzah, if townsmen and villagers came out to join them. The lost annals of the Kings of Israel recorded *the rest of the matters of Zimri*, but whatever those were they fell within a span of a single week. It may be that once he heard of events at Gibbethon there was little to do but muster such defenses as he could.

*And Omri went up from Gibbethon, and all Israel with him, and they lay siege to Tirzah. And it came to pass, when Zimri saw the city was taken, he went into the castle of the king's house, and he burnt the king's house over him with fire, and he died (vv. 17-18).*

Tirzah was in a beautiful but exposed site, not a stout place to withstand a siege. Resistance could not have been long, and may not even have been stubborn, especially if men who had conspired with Zimri against Elah declined to fight for him against Omri.

The dénouement is ambiguous in its pronouns: Read one way, "he" who set the fire was Zimri, immolating himself in the royal seat that he had seized but could not hold. Read another way, "he" was Omri (the interpretation of the Peshitta text and of Josephus), but that would mean that the victor, now in possession of the town, destroyed the castle that was about to become his own. Either way, Zimri realized that Tirzah was lost and with it his gamble, withdrew into his last stronghold, and died there in a conflagration. In an archaeological dig at the site believed to be biblical Tirzah, a stratum dated to this period was found covered with ash and marks of charring.<sup>1</sup> If the flames of the king's house spread to the town, these may be the scars of Zimri's history as King of Israel.

Zimri did get his name into the listings of the royal annals, a recognition that his week after all constituted a reign. And it was a name not soon forgotten. A half-century later, the mother of another slain king found it her sharpest taunt to call the regicide "Zimri" (II Kg. 9:30).

The ambition of the Captain of Half the Chariotry was the great opportunity for the Captain of the Host. Were it not for Zimri, Omri could only have attained the throne if he himself overthrew and slaughtered the House of Baasha that he served. But once Zimri had performed the role of traitor-assassin, then Omri was acclaimed and raised up as the hero chosen to bring him down.

"All Israel" had lifted Omri to the throne at Gibbethon, but his rule was not undisputed:

*Then the people of Israel were divided into two parts. Half of the people followed Tibni ben-Ginath, to make him king, and half followed Omri. And the people that followed Omri were stronger than the people that followed Tibni ben-Ginath. And Tibni died, and Omri reigned. In the thirty-first year of Asa, King of Judah, Omri reigned over Israel for twelve years (I Kg. 16:21-23).*

In the Masoretic text this is the entire record of the civil war. In the Septuagint there are a few more words: "So Tibni died, and his brother Joram died at the same time, and Omri reigned after Tibni."

The statement that two brothers, presumably comrades in the struggle against Omri, died at the same time, suggests – but does not prove – a violent end together, killed in battle or captured and executed. The chronological

calculations in I Kings coordinate the death of Elah and the brief tenure of Zimri

with the 27th regnal year of Asa, King of Judah, but the start of Omri's reign is postponed to the 31st regnal year of Asa. This gap of four years, and the remark in the Septuagint that "Omri reigned after Tibni," imply that while Tibni was not allotted a place on the roster of the Kings of Israel, as long as he lived his claim was a cloud on Omri's title. Only when the latter held full power without a rival was he officially enrolled as monarch. Yet, the years of the civil war are not left as an inter-regnum. When Omri's full reign is tallied at 12 regnal years, the count begins from the fall of Zimri and not from the death of Tibni.

The figure of Tibni is so indistinct that it is not even clear whether "ben-Ginath" means that he was son of a man named Ginath or, in alternative biblical usage, native son of a town called Ginath. He had to be a man of standing to pose a challenge to the victorious Captain of the Host and sustain it for some four years. He must also have had a fighting force formidable enough to defy the nation's foremost general and hold the outcome so long at jeopardy. The Narrator gives the estimate of a roughly equal division of the people, and views the contest not as between Omri and Tibni but between *the people who followed Omri* and *the people who followed Tibni*. This points not just to a duel between two contenders but to a split among the populace. The Narrator gives no hint of the line or cause of that split but there are several possibilities, none of which can be tested on evidence:<sup>2</sup>

A. There was a geographical division between blocs of tribes. If so, then Omri and Tibni would each have held his own region, a plausible condition for a civil war to last so long within so small a country. Omri had Tirzah, and that was in the territory of West Manasseh. His own tribal roots are not known, but may well have been in Issachar, whose lands were directly north of West Manasseh. Between West Manasseh and the border of the Kingdom of Judah was only its brother-tribe Ephraim. If this was Omri's territorial base, then Tibni's was in the north, and perhaps in Israel's domains east of the Jordan River.

B. The populace, or parts thereof, felt that the soldiers in the camp at Gibbethon had usurped the right of the *Kahal* [Assembly] to acclaim a ruler,

and put forth a candidate of their own. To maintain that candidacy, Tibni would have to have some effective military backing as well.

C. Tibni's party stood for the religion and traditions of the children of Israel, while Omri's party was partial to foreign innovations. Yet the Narrator of I Kings, concerned above all else with moral values, does not even hint at a moral issue here, much less define Tibni as the champion of the ancestral values.

In the course of this struggle, rulers of neighboring states would naturally have an interest in who was to rule Israel, and even a preference. There is nothing in the text on such a preference, but post-biblical sources had reason to believe that King Asa of Judah favored Omri and even contracted a marriage between his own son and heir and a daughter of Omri.<sup>3</sup>

Another royal match, and one recorded in the biblical text, is the marriage of Omri's son and successor Ahab to the Phoenician Princess Jezebel, whose father King Ethbaal ruled the wealthy realm of Tyre-Sidon on Israel's northwestern border. But it cannot be said whether Ethbaal helped Omri in the struggle with Tibni, or whether he decided to ally with him only after the latter had secured his throne, or whether he postponed the alliance until after the accession of Ahab.

The name "Omri" is not unique in the biblical onomasticon. It appears three times in I Chronicles, once for a Benjaminite, once for a Judahite, and once for Omri ben-Michael who was governor of the tribe of Issachar in the time of King David (I Chron. 7:8, 9:4, 27:18). In Hebrew nomenclature an individual is introduced with a personal name followed by "*ben* [son of]" or "*bat* [daughter of]" and the name of the father. Occasionally, a grandfather, clan or tribe is added. For example, Jeroboam I appears as *Jeroboam ben-Nebat a man of Ephraim*, and Baasha as *Baasha ben-Ahijah of the House of Issachar*. Contrary to this usage, neither Zimri nor Omri has a patronymic, a particularly odd omission for the man who founded one of the Northern Kingdom's most important dynasties.

It is just possible that the name of Omri's father was once in the record but was lost, the way Tibni's brother Joram slipped out of the Masoretic text. If not, then the Narrator of the Book of Kings either did not know or declined to use the

name. If he indeed knew nothing at all about Omri's background – though he knew that Tibni was "ben-Ginath" – then the data must have been missing from The Book of the Chronicles of the Kings of Israel and other contemporary Omride sources.

It has been suggested that this king was stripped of a full identity as a subtle mark of disdain; but that was not the practice with denunciations, as witness the oft-repeated phrase *the sin of Jeroboam ben-Nebat*. A newly-made sovereign might have something in his background that he preferred not to reveal, but in a society so conscious of family that would only stimulate curiosity and speculation. (The difficulty of suppressing discreditable tales is illustrated with Jeroboam I, whose mother is a widow in the Masoretic text but a harlot in the Septuagint.)

It has also been suggested that Omri hid his lineage because he was not an Israelite but a Canaanite or foreign mercenary, who rose to power through military service to King Baasha. "Omri" is indeed a Hebrew name, but it does not contain a theophoric or national element, and so might have been used among other Northwest Semitic peoples as well. This argument presupposes further that his father's name, in contrast, was patently foreign and therefore suppressed. This is a very wispy extrapolation from the single circumstance that he is merely "Omri" rather than "Omri ben-xxx." Furthermore, even if he kept an alien patronymic out of the royal archives, he could not have concealed an inconvenient extraction that violated the prohibition preserved in Deuteronomy 17:15: *You shall set one of your brothers as king over you. You may not put a foreigner over you, who is not your brother.*

The biblical historians had other sources for his time, some of them very hostile to him and the dynasty he founded, but in the many condemnations of the Omride line, there is no hint of alien origin. On the contrary, the accusations against the Omrides are subsumed in the words that the prophet Elijah addressed to Ahab ben-Omri: *"You and your father's house have forsaken the commandments of the Lord"* [18:19]. This charge could be brought only against men who were Israelites and thus bound by the Covenant.

If there is any clue to Omri's background, it may be his family's links to the town of Jezreel in the territory of Issachar, the tribe that had once been governed by Omri Ben-Michael, and that produced Baasha, who chose Omri

as his Captain of the Host. Omri built the new city of Samaria as a capital for the Kingdom of Israel, but his son and grandsons had their private residence at Jezreel. They may have chosen it for its scenic charm and clement weather, or it just may have been the family hometown.<sup>4</sup>

Omri's background is a mystery, and the reason for the mystery is itself mysterious.

Omri finally established his rule about a half-century after the Northern tribes split from Judah and established their own kingdom. In that time, it had not flourished. Yet despite religious and moral backsliding, political instability, and military defeats, it survived. The religion and moral code of the Israelites endured, and those who clung most fast to them were also most resolute on bringing their people to a renewal of fidelity and integrity. Now there was a new and able royal dynasty to strive for the nation's strength and prosperity. The goals need not have been at odds. It was to be the tragedy of the House of Omri that it chose to pervert one in pursuit of the other.

#### NOTES

1. See Roland de Vaux, "The Excavations at Tell el-Far'ah and the Site of Ancient Tirzah," *Palestine Exploration Quarterly* (1956) pp. 125 ff.
2. See J. Alberto Soggin, "Tibni, King of Israel," in *Old Testament and Oriental Studies* (Rome Biblical Institute Press, 1975); J. Maxwell Miller, "So Tibni Died," *Vetus Testamentum* XVII (1968) pp. 392-99.
3. *Seder Olam Rabbah* Chapter 17; Tosefta Sota 25.
4. See B. D. Napier, "The Omrides of Jezreel," *Vetus Testamentum* IX (1953) pp. 66-78; Nadav Na'aman, "Royal Estates in the Jezreel Valley," *Eretz Israel* XV (1981) pp. 140-44 (Hebrew).